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AUTHOR Gregg, Joan; And Others
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ABSTRACT

The minimum competency goal that now dominates college basic skills instruction is not adequate to prepare the student for success in and beyond college. More can be accomplished within basic skills courses than the mere acquisition of literal information from a reading selection. The use of thematic unity can impose meaningful organization on the content of a reading course. This entails selecting a theme for a number of weeks or for the term that will lend itself to readings in a broad spectrum of academic disciplines and genres. Social science concepts lend themselves most readily to thematic organization in a reading course. Key social science terms such as self awareness, creativity, rebellion, identity, community, autonomy, generational relationships, work and family, are good bases for thematically integrated reading units. Since various genres and types of materials comprise such a reading course, students will learn techniques for approaching such diverse forms as textbook readings, journalistic and professional articles, essays, and literature. A thematically unified course, enhanced by collaborative problem solving tasks, takes students beyond the minimum competency goal and helps them assert a degree of control over an environment that is complex and ambiguous. (FL)

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THEMATIC UNITY AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN READING REMEDIATION: A SOCIAL SCIENCE MODEL

by

Joan Gregg, Beth Pacheco and Serena Nanda

About a decade ago, American universities began opening their doors to increasing numbers of educationally underprepared students; these institutions were then challenged with a new and formidable task--providing post-secondary reading remediation. Remediation programs were developed in order to preserve the standards of the academic classroom and to ensure that the newly-opened university doors did not become, in fact, revolving doors. The goals were and ought to be the same for remedial as for traditional college students: to achieve a measure of academic and vocational success, and to prepare for roles as thoughtful and constructive citizens in a democratic society. Fundamental to the realization of these goals is the ability to read critically, particularly in social science areas, where the content is often complex, abstract and ambiguous.[1]

THEMATIC UNITY

Ordinarily, in remedial courses, students are asked to apply critical reading skills to a welter of unrelated, abridged, illogically sequenced materials. In this conventional approach,

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which offers widely disparate material in each lesson, internalization of the critical reading skills is delayed and diminished. Students are not given the opportunity to build up a body of knowledge in any one area; therefore, they can bring little information or informed opinion to discussion of their texts. Their lack of prior knowledge defuses interest and decreases motivation; it diffuses focus between reading skills and content, and inhibits recycling of vocabulary. As A.N. Whitehead states in "The Aims of Education," "the results of teaching small parts of a large number of subjects is the passive reception of disconnected ideas, not illumination with any spark of vitality."[2]

Thematic unity, on the other hand, imposes meaningful organization on the content of a reading course. It entails selecting a theme for a number of weeks or for the term which will lend itself to readings in a broad spectrum of academic disciplines and genres. Social science concepts lend themselves most readily to thematic organization in a reading course. Key social science terms such as self-awareness, creativity, rebellion, identity, community, autonomy, generational relationships, work and family would be excellent bases for thematically integrated reading units.

Various genres and types of materials will comprise such a reading course. Therefore, students will learn techniques for approaching such diverse forms as textbook readings, journalistic and professional articles, essays and literature.

In a thematically unified reading course designed by the writers for community college students, the concept of autonomy was explored. Reading selections for the term included Margaret Mead's "Dealing with the Aged," which examines autonomy among older Americans,[3] Phillip Meyers' "If Hitler Asked You to Electrocute a Stranger, Would You? Probably.", which describes a laboratory experiment in measuring obedience, and Bernard Malamud's short story, "A Summer's Reading," a portrayal of a young man's intellectual and social maturation. These same reading selections could also be incorporated into different themes. Mead's article, for instance, could be included under the theme of generational relationships, to be complemented with such readings as O'Henry's short story, "The Last Leaf" and Simone de Beauvoir's Introducation to Coming of Age. Thematic units, furthermore, need not be limited to concepts from social science; the biological sciences, technologies and the humanities may also be sources of themes.

In a thematically integrated course, students gain a solid foundation in a thoughtfully selected area. Since they do not have to deal with totally new content at each meeting, they are free to concentrate on assimilating and applying the target reading skill. Additionally, thematic unity provides students with an opportunity, all too infrequent in their past education, to work a problem through, modifying their opinions as their awareness of the complexity of the issue grows through reading and analysis. Fred M. Hechinger, in The New York Times, recently discussed the importance of teaching analytical thinking and using thematically related materials as a means of counteracting "the often mechanical way basic skills are taught and the largely passive way in which children learn from watching television--absorbing what they see without analyzing what it means."[4]

Finally, the thematically unified course, by integrating and reinforcing both content and skills instruction, makes it possible to measure progress in the two areas in a variety of ways. Evaluative activities may include a Cloze test of specific reading comprehension based on previously read passages, a Cloze test of general comprehension based on a thematically related passage "as close to the criterion language style as possible,"[5] or a completion test, again based on the original text, but with larger groups of key features deleted. Additional tasks which measure students'

acquisition of both content and skills are essay examination questions approximating those in credit-bearing college courses (see below, Applying Reading Skills to Social Science Concepts) and assignments which provide thematically related passages for interpretation and comparison to the viewpoints expressed in the original article. In our reading course which took autonomy as the theme, for example, some evaluations of student progress were a Cloze test of specific comprehension utilizing a pivotal section of Mead's article, "Dealing with the Aged," a Cloze test of general comprehension utilizing material from the newspaper article, "Old, Bold and Angry," by Jane Hall, and related passages for interpretation and comparison from Erik Erikson's Eight Ages of Man, Edgar Lee Masters' "George Grey" from Spoon River Anthology and case studies from Burt Smith's Aging in America.

The thematically unified approach is most successful when the theme chosen is the instructor's personal choice based on a careful examination of his/her values, interests, experiences and education. Harold Laski has noted in "The Obligations of a Teacher" that "...the book that excites the teacher is a natural source of illumination for the student."[6] Organizing a course around a theme and materials the instructor respects engages his/her fullest creative energies; this unquestionably redounds to the benefit of the students. Over a number

acquisition of both content and skills are essay examination questions approximating those in credit-bearing college courses (see below, Applying Reading Skills to Social Science Concepts) and assignments which provide thematically related passages for interpretation and comparison to the viewpoints expressed in the original article. In our reading course which took autonomy as the theme, for example, some evaluations of student progress were a Cloze test of specific comprehension utilizing a pivotal section of Mead's article, "Dealing with the Aged," a Cloze test of general comprehension utilizing material from the newspaper article, "Old, Bold and Angry," by Jane Hall, and related passages for interpretation and comparison from Erik Erikson's Eight Ages of Man, Edgar Lee Masters' "George Grey" from Spoon River Anthology and case studies from Burt Smith's Aging in America.

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of years, as instructors explore a variety of themes, they will have built up a library of thematically organized materials. Ultimately then, they will be able to offer their classes the opportunity to choose from among a number of themes, all of which relate to the goal of higher education: preparation for roles as contributive citizens in our pluralistic, democratic society.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The thematically unified course of study quickly introduces a body of common information which invites analysis and discussion in small learning groups. This collaborative learning activity, to which all students will have something to contribute, has particular value for remedial students, who are usually only passive participants in their education. These students have been taught, but have not learned . Through small group discussion their alienation from the learning experience may be reversed.

Collaborative learning methods remove from the classroom activity two inhibiting influences. One is that of the teacher, whose ego investment in the students' success, whether manifested as anxiety or benevolence, often generates superficial responses. The second is that of a frequently inattentive peer audience

before whom the poorer student may quail and the better student may be reluctant to shine. Small group learning, however, provides a structure which allows students to try out new skills and problem solve aloud. It neutralizes the charged atmosphere of the traditional classroom in which students, unwilling to criticize each other or risk public criticism by the teacher, often hide behind a facade of boredom and impatience. The less threatening small group discussion encourages a more adventurous and thoughtful exchange of views which is essential to developing such reading skills as understanding connative language, making inferences and following logical argument. Finally, an enthusiasm for discussing abstract concepts which is often missing in traditional classrooms is an observable result of collaborative learning methods.

Collaborative learning can take many forms. Its basic dynamic, however, is always shared peer activity which maximizes the students' responsibilities for learning as they practice and apply target skills to reading materials. Instructors must make important decisions regarding the fixed elements in small group reading activities. They must choose the reading selection, design the accompanying questions/tasks, form the groups and lead the plenary session. They must also consdier the following variables in planning small group activities: the size and

homogeneous/heterogeneous composition of the class, the nature of the material and the target skill, and the time available. In teaching a lesson which emphasizes a highly abstract concept such as autonomy, for example, homogeneous grouping may be desirable, as it permits the assignment of tasks of varying degrees of difficulty and compels the fuller participation of the weaker students. On the other hand, when the focus of the lesson is a study skills such as outlining, paraphrasing or summarizing, heterogeneous grouping, where the weaker student acquires information as the stronger student applies principles, may be appropriate. Furthermore, students who have common difficulties such as expressing a main idea in their own words, may be grouped together to work on such tasks for several lessons.

The instructor must be alert to monitor the assignments of particular types of questions throughout the term, so that over a period of time all students will have the opportunity to develop competence in the whole range of reading skills. One way to achieve this is to assign all questions to all students for homework and have them pool their information and ideas when they meet in their groups. Another approach is to assign a pivotal question(s) to all groups and an additional disparate question(s) to each separate group. In our work with Mead's

"Dealing with the Aged," for example, all groups were assigned a vocabulary question on the key concept of autonomy which required use of both context clues and dictionary definitions, and each separate group was assigned an additional thought question.

DESIGNING QUESTIONS

It has been found that "of vital importance...are the kinds of questions teachers ask. These questions appear to determine the kinds of comprehension and critical reading skills students achieve."[7] In a first reading of the selection, the instructor must determine which words to gloss, which to assign to students for definition from context/word analysis/dictionary entry, and which words are key concepts requiring extended class discussion.

It is helpful for instructors to outline and annotate their texts in order to design questions which provide a frame for the content of the article and which will elicit sustained text-based responses. The nature and the organization of the selection should be reflected in the types of questions/tasks assigned.

For example, Mead's article had as its focal point the lack of autonomy in the lifestyles of older Americans. Since it related the negative effects of the American ideal of independence on the aged, and described the aging process in several other cultures, students were asked to discern shades of meaning in the author's use of the terms autonomy and independence, to enumerate the good and bad effects of the American idea of independence on the aged, and to contrast the American style of aging with those of other cultures.

APPLYING READING SKILLS TO SOCIAL SCIENCE CONCEPTS

Mastering social science content requires dealing with concepts in two ways. In the first place, students must realize that the concepts of social science cannot always be precisely defined. They must therefore learn to deal with elastic concepts, rather than rigid dictionary definitions. They will find, for example, that a particular concept, such as autonomy, will not only be defined differently, but more important, will be used differently, by different authors. The dictionary definition gives students a denotative baseline from which to work, but eventually they must be willing and able to follow the instructor out into the deep waters of connotation. Autonomy, for example, although defined in the dictionary as independence, or freedom, as of the will has a number of legitimate, associated meanings, not all of which are adequately

conveyed by the dictionary definition. One meaning, self-actualization, generally signifies realizing one's own potential, following the laws of inner growth, unfolding in the human way. Although to Western students, independence and self-actualization may seem synonymous, they are not so in all cultural contexts. The social science instructor would want students to appreciate that in other cultures, the ways in which one achieves self-actualization or autonomy is not through independence, but rather through a communion or identification with the group. Without critical reading skills, such crucial distinctions would escape the student, whose comprehension would be limited to the literal definitions of terms.

In the second place, students must be able to perform a variety of cognitive tasks in relation to the target concept. In regard to autonomy, for example, the student should be able to respond effectively to such questions as 1) compare the possibilities of autonomy for males and females, or the old and the young 2) discuss the author's point of view on the possibilities for autonomy in non-Western cultures 3) justify your idea that the United States offers equal opportunities for autonomy for different segments of its population 4) interpret the Declaration of Independence for what it says about autonomy

5) narrate/describe an incident in which you feel you acted autonomously 6) explain how it might be possible to say that although life in modern societies offers a great deal of choice, it may allow for very little autonomy.

CONCLUSIONS

The "minimum competency" goal that now dominates college basic skills instruction is not adequate to prepare the student for success in and beyond college. More can be accomplished withinobasic skills courses than the mere acquisition of literal information from a reading selection. A thematically unified course, enhanced by collaborative problem solving tasks, takes students beyond the minimum competency goal and helps them assert a degree of control over an environment that is complex and ambiguous, and getting more so every day.

Footnotes

1. Anselmo, Thomas & Weber, Eilen, "Yes....but....", New York City Community College, research in progress.

2. Models for Thinking and Writing, ed. Warren Taylor. World Publishing Co. (1966), 320.

3. This article served as the text for the writers' workshop presentation, "The 50 Minute Word: Applying Reading Skills to Social Science Concepts," International Reading Association, Twenty Fourth Annual Convention, April 1979.

4. "About Education: A Booster Shot for the 3 R's," The New York Times, Tuesday, February 27, 1979.

5. "Using Cloze Procedure as an Overall Language Proficiency Test," Kenneth C. Aitken, TESOL Quarterly, Vol. 11 #1 March 1977.

6. Laski, Harold, "The Obligations of a Teacher," Models for Thinking and Writing, ed. Warren Taylor. World Publishing Co. (1966), 105.

7. Smith, Helen K., "Critical Reading," Reading for All. Newark, Del., International Reading Association, Inc. (1972), 170.